

MASS, SERIAL AND SENSATIONAL HOMICIDES: THE INVESTIGATIVE PERSPECTIVE

VERNON J. GEBERTH, M.P.S.

Lieutenant Commander
New York City Police Department
New York, New York

I AM very pleased to be here this afternoon as a representative of the New York City Police Department to address the New York Academy of Medicine's *Homicide Symposium*.

I shall expand in part on Dr. Dietz's presentation from the perspective of the homicide investigator. First, I shall refer to the scope or extent of serial murders and the threat they pose to society. I shall then present some information relative to what we in the investigative field are doing, along with forensic psychiatrists and criminal psychologists, in an attempt to identify this unique type of killer. Since mass, serial and sensational homicides are distinctively unique, it is imperative that we clearly define these terms because of the psychological implications involved in these types of murders.

Mass murder. (Four or more murders in a single incident within a short span of time.) On April 15, 1984, in the East New York section of Brooklyn, a 34-year-old man, identified as Christopher Thomas, shot and killed 10 women and children in what has come to be known as the "Palm Sunday Massacre."

Serial murder involves the murder of separate victims with time breaks between murders, as minimal as two days to weeks or months. These time breaks are referred to as "cooling off" periods. An example of a serial killer is David Berkowitz, the "Son of Sam," who terrorized New York City for some 13 months during 1976-77 as he traveled through the city shooting young couples as they sat in parked autos.

Sensational homicides are a type of murder that arouses an intense public interest. An example would be "spree murders," which are a series of

*Presented as part of a *Symposium on Homicide: The Public Health Perspective* held by the Committee on Public Health of the New York Academy of Medicine October 3 and 4, 1985, and made possible by a generous grant from the Ittleson Foundation.

sequential homicides connected to one event committed over a period of hours to days without a cooling off period. For example, on August 1, 1966, in Austin, Texas, Charles Witman killed his wife and mother. He then traveled to the University of Texas Tower with his rifle, and systematically shot and killed 14 people. Another example of sensational homicide is the "lust murder," a sexually motivated murder involving torture, violent sexual trauma, mutilation or dismemberment. For example, on October 12, 1979 the nude body of a 26-year-old female was found on the roof landing of her residence. The nipples of her breasts had been severed and objects inserted into her vagina. The killer was subsequently diagnosed as the classic "dis-organized" type personality.

Briefly, and I do not want to spend too much time, I shall mention the names of some of our more infamous serial killers to provide some idea of the scope of these phenomena. People such as Theodore Bundy, who killed some 33 women across the United States, Angelo Bouno and his cousin Nicholas Bianco, who became known as the "Hillside Strangler," New York's own "Son of Sam" who killed six; Coril Watts, Texas, Michigan and Canada, 40 women; the "Zodiac Killer" of California, 40 people; John Norman Collins, Michigan seven; Richard Cottingham, New York and New Jersey, five women, Edmund Kemper from California, nine; Juan Corona, California, 25; Wayne Williams, Atlanta, Georgia, 25; John Wayne Gacy, Chicago, 33 . . . are just a few of the names from the list of known serial killers. The bottom line is that approximately 31 people such as those I have mentioned above have killed more than 712 people. That is a lot of homicides. From an investigative point of view it is damn scary. Most of these deaths were interjurisdictional and seemed to be well planned by systematic, transient and intelligent killers. Without trying to sound too cynical, sometimes we find it hard to function within our own respective organizations. How would you like to interact with five or 10 agencies and watch human nature take its course or experience the difficulty in attempting to establish some sort of commonality in order to proceed with the investigation?

THE INVESTIGATIVE RESPONSE

Homicide is the ultimate crime and therefore requires the maximum investigative effort. When dealing with mass, serial and sensational homicides, this examination should be expanded to include the disciplines of psychiatry

and psychology. Mass, serial and sensational murders pose unique investigative considerations due to the psychopathology and psychodynamics involved in such events. The participation of psychiatrists and psychologists with the necessary experience and background to assist in the criminal investigation is a logical and commonsense approach to assume in these types of inquiries.

A number of incidents in recent years, such as the Atlanta child killings, The Chicago Tylenol case, and more recently the "Night Stalker" case in California, demonstrate the need for investigative teams staffed by criminal psychologists and forensic psychiatrists who can actively participate in both the investigative and prosecutorial aspects of an investigation.

Traditionally, psychiatrists and psychologists only entered into an analysis of a crime after the suspect was in custody. Their evaluations were usually aimed at determining whether or not the suspect was "sane" at the time he committed the offense.

The exception to this traditional role was graphically displayed during the late 1950s and early 1960s by Dr. James A. Brussel, a New York psychiatrist, who provided law enforcement authorities with valuable information on such sensational cases as the "Mad Bomber" of New York City, and the "Boston Strangler" of Massachusetts, as well as other investigations in which he "profiled" the suspect based on the psychodynamics of an event and the psychiatric "clues" he deduced from the crimes he examined.

The "Son of Sam" case, which occurred in New York City over a period of 13 months during 1976-77, brought an active involvement of both psychiatry and psychology into the criminal investigation, as police authorities attempted to identify a "mad man" who would shoot young couples as they sat in parked autos at various locations in the city. This serial killer communicated with authorities by sending cryptic messages to a major metropolitan newspaper and claimed that he was acting under instructions communicated to him by a neighbor's dog.

The use of psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as psychological profiles, was rapidly becoming a recognized interdisciplinary approach in law enforcement's endeavor to solve specific types of crime.

Law enforcement's use of profiles however, remained sporadic until 1978, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation established a Psychological Profiling Program as part of its Behavioral Science Unit in Quantico, Virginia. Research conducted within the Behavioral Science Unit revealed a serious deficiency in the number of credible and experienced forensic professionals

available to assist law enforcement with psychological profiles. The Profiling Program attempted to fill this void by actively interacting with professionals within psychiatry and psychology, and reviewing and investigating specific types of cases, such as those previously described in this article, and others from various locations throughout the United States. Soon they were providing local law enforcement agencies with strategic information in the form of psychological profiles. These profiles represented an educated attempt to provide investigators with specific information as to the *type* of individual who would have committed a certain *type* of crime.

The type of individual who commits mass, serial and sensational homicides is certainly a type of personality that can be profiled. A description of the salient psychological and behavioral characteristics which identify personality and behavioral traits or patterns can be used to classify and distinguish such an individual from the general population.

In 1981 a system designed to identify serial murderers was introduced by Mr. Pierce Brooks, a retired Chief of Police and former Homicide Commander of the Los Angeles Police Department. This system was known as VI-CAP, which is an acronym for Violent Criminal Apprehension Program. It was designed to collect, collate and analyze all aspects of an investigation using the latest computer and communications technology. The VI-CAP system promised to centralize all active and unsolved homicide investigations involving mutilation, dismemberment, torture or violent sexual trauma. It would also include attacks on victims who had survived a criminal assault and fit a VI-CAP pattern. In fact, proponents of this program suggested that if VI-CAP had been in effect during the time Theodore Bundy, a serial killer responsible for the deaths of approximately 33 women, was travelling across the northwestern United States, he would have been apprehended in Utah, well before his murderous rampage in Florida, where he was finally apprehended.

The combined success of both the Psychological Profiling Program and the VI-CAP concept consequently produced Congressional legislation establishing a National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime in July 1984. This Center is based at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. It functions as a subdivision of the Behavioral Science Unit and is composed of four sections: Research and Development, Training, VI-CAP and Criminal Personality Profiling and Consultation. Local law enforcement will now be able to submit investigations of mass, serial and sensational homicides, as well as sex crimes and other specified investigations, to a central location for anal-

ysis and identification of similar crime patterns that may exist in other jurisdictions and that may possibly be related. This analysis will be based upon the following investigative data: modus operandi, victimology, physical evidence, suspect description and suspect behavior exhibited before, during and after the crime.

The overall goal of this Center is to provide law enforcement agencies the information necessary to initiate a coordinated multi-agency investigation and to expedite the identification and apprehension of systematic, intelligent and transient killers who engage in mass, serial and sensational murders, as well as other specified crimes.

The operation will be multidisciplinary in scope and requires teamwork to bring together the effort necessary to deal with these unique phenomena of homicide.

(The discussion was followed by a slide presentation by Lt. Cmdr. Gebert, illustrating characteristic homicides committed by both disorganized and organized types of offenders.)